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ABSTRACT

This paper explores dimensions of the process of education by elaborating on the moral complexity of deception as delineated by David Nyberg. Questions examined in the paper include the circumstances under which deception may be acceptable and useful and how deception may function to augment self-direction. The paper takes the position that the most dangerous form of deception is self-deception. This study offers highlights of Nyberg's paper as well as a brief overview of some elements of gestalt philosophy (the basis for the remarks on Nyberg's paper). Conclusions discuss how schools may better serve a democractic society by shifting the curricular emphasis from socialization as the primary goal of instruction to the development of independent, inventive thinkers and doers as the temporary primary goal of instruction; temporary because eventually a democratic society needs a balance between the socializing and the development of independent thinkers. (JD)

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Deception, Self-direction and Schooling

by Conrad Pritscher

The purpose of this paper is to explore dimensions of the process of education by elaborating on the moral complexity of deception as delineated by David Nyberg. The question that arises is: If one is involved in the process of becoming self-directing, under what conditions is deception, including self-deception, useful? If at the heart of self-direction is one's freedom to decide for oneself what will secure or endanger one's freedom, how might deception function to augment self-direction?

This paper takes the position that deception in its most dangerous form is self-deception. A spy in a hostile country during war time will probably be shot if he does not deceive. The lying spy is accepted by his homeland and his enemies expect him to lie. Lying to oneself, however, can rarely be as easily justified as lying to enemies.

Lying is commonly understood as the opposite of telling the truth. Deception is more extended than lying. Deception may also include concealment, obliqueness and silence.

This paper was motivated by David Nyberg's insightful paper entitled "The Moral Complexity of Deception." I will (1) briefly mention some highlights of Nyberg's paper, (2) give a brief overview of some elements of gestalt philosophy on which I base my remarks, (3) attempt to show the power of viewing deception as it relates to oneself, and (4) draw some conclusions about how schools may better serve a democratic society by shifting the curricular emphases from

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socialization as the primary goal of instruction to the development of independent, inventive thinkers/doers as the temporary primary goal of instruction. I say temporary because eventually our democratic society will need balance between the socializing and the development of independent thinkers/doers.

The "doer" is added after independent thinker as a primary purpose to emphasize the notion that the thinker who doesn't act on his thought is as dangerous to a democratic society as one who acts without thinking. In a fascist society that is not the case. Robotic, docile servants are cherished in fascist societies. In fascist societies, the citizens act but the action is analogous to action in and around a beehive.

The gestalt assumptions at the basis of this paper hold that deception to avoid fascism may be an admirable achievement. Self-deception is not only not to be admired but is to be avoided not at all costs but at many costs. I think that being tentative about what is self-deception and what isn't is necessary to avoid self-deception. Being continually certain about when one is or isn't self-deceiving is a sign of self-deception. I therefore am open to the possibility that what I am saying and what I will say may be total trash.

Some Highlights of Nyberg's Moral Complexity of Deception

Nyberg believes that "deception is one of the indispensable arts of success in virtually every human undertaking." He says that "we know from experience that success over time in friendship, marriage,

education, politics, business, and entertainment is not possible without deception, but we have difficulty admitting this openly and talking about it frankly." Nyberg has come to believe "that the need for misrepresenting some aspects of truth and reality is nearly constant."

Deception, as viewed by Nyberg:

1. is almost a necessity if one is to be practically intelligent.
2. should not be done whenever one feels like it.
3. ought to be done for reasons (some of them moral).
4. ought not to be viewed "as an exception that needs justifying against a background of truth telling."[3]
5. is already done by everyone.
6. is one of life's necessities.
7. is found in every culture.
8. provides advantage in carrying out one's intentions.
9. offers a chance to escape confrontations without having to fight.
10. is in one of its forms, lying, inaccurately held by some to be a direct assault on the foundations of civilization itself.

A Brief Overview of Central Elements in Gestalt Philosophy

Quality experience according to gestalt philosophy, is contactful experience in which one meets his higher level needs. Contact can be

made with things and events but usually it is the coming in and out of contact with people that help meet one higher level needs.

A cyclical process explains the coming in and out of contact. The first stage of the cycle is a sensation stage where one senses something. The second stage of the cycle is awareness where one pays attention for a time to a sensation, feeling or thought. The awareness can lead to a third stage, an energy rise that can lead one to a fourth stage, an action stage. The action leads to a fifth stage, the Contact stage. Eventually, there needs to be a sixth stage, a withdrawal from contact so that one may open himself to a new sensation(s) so that new awareness may emerge and the cycle continues. The five common ways in which we interrupt this experience cycle so that contact is avoided will be dealt with later.

Self-deception

One assumption on which I base my remarks is that when our knowing moves from knowing tentatively to knowing with continual certainty, we deceive ourselves.

The above subheading includes the notion of self. One consequence of Cartesian logic and positivistic, behavioristic thought in western society is the self-deceptive nature of excluding the notion of self in research. Selves within the gestalt framework are more than simply consequential along with other consequential things. Selves are of utmost consequence. Other things are of consequence to the degree that they affect selves.

Since scientific methods and instruments have not detected a self, the self is not dealt with in most scientific papers. The fact that the hypotheses that scientists test by use of scientific methods and instruments is likewise not derived from those scientific methods and instruments demonstrates that scientists are not always scientific. The method of generating what hypothesis to test is not scientific. The verifiability principal at the heart of scientific testing is rooted in the notion that if something can't be falsified it is of no scientific consequence. This falsifiability principle, however, cannot itself be falsified yet it is the basis of scientific endeavor. Why selves are not dealt with in scientific matters is a political matter.

Deception and truth telling are, to an extent, political concerns. Nyberg has clearly stated that, "deception is a property of language and not merely some kind of perversion of it." The function of language, according to Nyberg is, "to regulate relationships among individuals and groups by maintaining surveillance over revealing and concealing information." This regulation of relationships is central to Gestalt philosophy. Contact, according to gestalt philosophy, primarily with individuals and groups is the function of awareness, knowledge, understanding and of what we conceive and imagine. Awareness, however, is most basic since one can have no knowledge, understanding or imaginings unless one is aware.

Morality, according to various common definitions, when applied to groups, includes explicit or tacit statements about what is right and what is wrong. The moral complexity of deception includes political elements in that statements about morality are included in

the function of language by keeping many people away and allowing relatively few people to get close, depending upon the degree to which one is satisfied with the amount and intensity of the human contact made.

Deception and Schooling

Schooling today is largely traditional schooling. Traditional schooling has focused mainly on socializing. As a result, schooling has neglected the development of the students' ability to decide for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.

Goodlad[5] reveals the extraordinary political hypocracy (deception) in our schools. Karp[6] provides evidence of the deception by pointing out that school personnel state that they want to provide education for citizenship and self-government but with great skill they prevent citizenship and stifle self-government.

Karp refers to a national study which shows that 58% of our thirteen-year-olds believe it is against the law to form a third political party. Karp believes that such thinking is a sign not of school failure but of subtle school success.

There is a growing body of evidence to support the idea that some self-deception saves us from high degrees of anxiety[7]. High degrees of anxiety are unconsciously interpreted as excessively destructive of well-being and integrity, and we at times lack awareness in a self-deceptive way so as to avoid anxiety. Some anxiety probably should be avoided. Other anxiety, if dealt with by not having an excessive need to know in advance what will happen before it happens,

can produce contact with others that will help us grow and meet our higher-level needs.

Being open to some potentially anxiety-producing events is what is frequently referred to with the use of the terms, "open," "being open," and "being open to experience." When we are closed to certain experience we at times prevent ourselves from making contact and therefore prevent ourselves from growing. When we don't grow, we keep ourselves from becoming self-directing. More will be said about this in the section on "Some Ways in Which Self-Deception Operates."

It appears that many school administrators and some teachers are not aware of the stifling of independent thought and the prevention of the development of citizenship. If they were aware of this stifling and prevention they would then become aware of their own shortage of independent thought and how they have been deceived into thinking they are mature citizens. Mature citizens don't stifle independent thought nor do they prevent the development of citizenship. This probable lack of maturity may be evidence of growing facism.

Fascist leaders do not want mature citizens of a democracy. The creeping nature of fascism includes within it the conscious thinking that independent, inventive student thought is to be guarded against lest "things" change too much too fast. Rapid change to a full-blown democracy would cause us too much anxiety so we unconsciously exclude it from awareness. Our country is closer to facism that we are willing to admit. I have heard of a new house bill that is proposing to do away with certain freedoms of those suspected of committing crimes. These freedoms have been in effect in our country for many years. Even the FBI, under the conservative J. Edgar Hoover, thought

that police ought not to have such power that this bill proposes to give them. Remember the power of the gestapo (police) in Nazi Germany.

Theodore Sizer's research also shows that our high school students are too often without initiative and are docile and compliant. Goodlad emphasized in his report that an extraordinary degree of student passivity stands out in the more than 1,000 classrooms his researchers visited. Sizer believes that being an effective intuitive thinker is smothered by the school's strong emphasis on "the right answer."

Student passivity is a way of keeping people away. We and our students want to keep people away some of the time. If we don't keep some people away some of the time, the consequences may not be as dire as in the case of the spy but we at times interpret some others "getting close" as serious enough to prevent through deception. Again as Nyberg has said, a function of language is to "regulate relationships among individuals and groups by maintaining surveillance over revealing and concealing information.

When one is involved in the process of becoming self-directing, which hopefully is most of the time for most of us, deception is legitimate when the individual judgement is that the deception will be better than non-deception for him and society in the long run and the short run. The main element is one's judgement and this self-judgement is at times connected to self-deception.

Some Ways In Which Self-Deception Operates

I propose that self-deception is so subtle that it is very difficult to notice. If one wants to eat a third piece of chocolate pie, after a large meal, and if that one is aware of the extra calories, etc. and their consequences and freely chooses it, then there is no detectable self-deception.

One way of deceiving ourselves is when some idea (a way of doing something or not doing something or a way of being or not being that was "put in our minds" by parents, teachers, and other believable significant people when we were quite young) is not questioned as adults. "Never get angry" is a notion that many of us were taught. This can be a useful learning if, as an adult, the individual decides that he and society will be better off by not inappropriately expressing anger. For the one who never allows himself to feel angry because his mother told him "never get angry" when he was age three, self-deception is an appropriate descriptor of what can lead to logical and psychological disfunction.

Another way of deceiving ourselves is when, for example, we push our state of being onto another person because our unconscious won't allow us to experience, for instance, anger. Again as a result of their avoiding an examination of the pros and cons of appropriate expression of anger, they may believe other people are angry at them. They don't bother to inquire as to whether or not that is the case. They believe it even when it isn't the case and as a result the term self-deception may be appropriately applied to those kinds of cases.

Another way we deceive ourselves is by operating on the assumption that we will be overwhelmed by bad and uncontrollable feelings if we do not prevent a feeling from becoming a strong feeling. We have not questioned the notion that we must have a reason for feeling what we are feeling. It is okay just to feel without a reason but we have deceived ourselves by not giving ourselves permission to feel what we are feeling without a reason. An example is as follows: I'm sad and crying and you ask why I'm sad and crying and I say a death of a close friend just occurred. You give me tacit permission to be sad and cry. If I could be sad and cry without anything specific happening you would not give me permission to be sad and cry. Others would probably ostracize me so I don't allow myself to be sad and cry unless I have a reason. As a result I remain out of touch with some of my feelings that then unconsciously affect my behavior.

A better example is when a person holds himself back from getting close to another person because the person believes the energy rise would be too much for him to control. He may want to express strong emotion if he had strong feeling so he prevents himself from having a strong feeling by moving away from a person whom he fears may create that strong feeling. In that instance the person doing the moving may be avoiding contact. Once again it is through contact, primarily with other people, that many of our needs are met. When our needs aren't met we don't grow. When we don't grow it is often more convenient to deceive to maintain an image of growth lest we are ostracized, rejected or disliked.

The fourth attention trap is an unaware continuing to stay with a contact with a person, thing, or event. It is the losing our identity in that person, thing, or event, so that it, she or he is choosing for us rather than our mutually agreeing to choose together. Attention is not paid to our sense of completeness. Completeness is not felt because this trap has sucked us in so that our attention is elsewhere in a way that inhibits our free, responsible choice. When this occurs we are afraid to let go of the contact because of the uncertainty involved in not knowing what our next contact will bring.

The last trap is almost an occupational hazard for many college teachers. It is an easy way for us to avoid growth producing experience. We do it to ourselves so subtlely that we don't even pay attention to our doing it. It is the result of a non-chosen reflection. That we do much chosen reflection is a source of much of our growth producing, self-directing behavior. That we do this reflecting even when we are not aware of it is a source of some of our incompleteness, imbalance, and disharmony. Action without thought is often damaging as is excessive thought without action. It is what we do when we want to be excessively certain. We block ourselves from action and contact by the expressive need to know what will happen before it happens. If we don't pay attention to it, we can't choose it. If we don't choose it, we lose control of ourselves. An excessively compulsive person exercises little or no choice during his doing of the thing he is compelled to do. The paradox of self-control is that we get more of it by not over-controlling. Unattended to excessive reflection is over-controlling which results in less

control. Living with some uncertainty can help us become more certain.

Excessive reflecting is attempting to give to ourselves what we need to get from our environment. If we excessively reflect in an unaware way, it is like attempting to breathe without atmosphere. We diminish ourselves when we excessively reflect without choosing to do it. When we don't know what we are doing, or when we don't know what is going on in and around us, we are probably not paying attention to our excessive reflection.

A third way we deceive ourselves is by not allowing ourselves to feel stronger feelings than very mild emotion. We expect that Plato's black horse of passion will dominate the white horse of reason thereby causing us to lose total control of ourselves. As a result we at times move away from contact with people because we unconsciously predict that the emotion we would feel may overbear our reason to the point that we would lose control. As a result of that kind of self-deception some of our higher level needs go unmet.

A fourth way we decieve ourselves is by unconsciously clinging to a previously growth-producing contact because we are do not know if or when another growth producing contact will occur. The unaware hanging on to a contact can prevent us from opening ourselves to new experience (new sensation from which new awareness etc. may arise). This excessive and unaware hanging on to "the old" can prevent us from "being open to experience" from which we can optimally meet our higher level needs.

The last common way in which we deceive ourselves is by excessive needs for cognitive certainty. When we have an excessive need to know

in advance what will happen before it happens, we close ourselves off to what may happen if we were more open to what might happen. This excessive need to know what will happen before it happens prevents us from taking risks. When we don't take some moderately calculated risks we are not "open to experience." We deceive ourselves when we are not "open to experience" because the excessive need for certainty is a paralyzer in that future relations with people can only be controlled moderately at best. A part of the self-deception arises when one forgets that his planned or controlled future relations are no more than present anticipations. Some present anticipations concerning contact with people are not verified by the real contact with people. This failure to verify emanates from an excessive lack of openness to experience. Some growth-producing contact is avoided in an unaware way so that some higher level needs may at times remain unmet. When that occurs we may be viewed as deceiving ourselves to the degree that we are closed to this potentially growth-producing experience. Each of us, of course, must decide for ourselves so that these five ways of deceiving ourselves are merely guidelines for an individual's use in deciding for himself when he is or is not involved in self-deception.

Conclusions

The lying spy, as I have mentioned, is accepted by most people. The assumption is that the society out of which the spy operates will be better off as a result of the spy's activities even though some of those activities include lying. What is also accepted although probably less so than the spy example is the lack of awareness that fosters excessive needs for certainty. The excessive needs for

certainty provide for very low risk-taking level which in turn prevents contact with people, things and events which, in turn, prevents one from meeting some higher level needs.

It is likely that the actions of those with an excessive need for certainty are more motivated by deficiency needs than by the life-enhancing being needs on which Abraham Maslow elaborates in his The Psychology of Being.

Teachers who operate out of deficiency needs are frequently closed in taking moderate risks. As a result they fail to develop character and are not attractive "characters" who are inquisitive, open-minded, self-directing models for their students.

If we had more self-directing, open-minded teachers it would seem that student self-direction would be a goal at least as important as the goal of socialization? The goal of socialization has lead us to be overly conformist group who are easily lead by those who are closed to experience.

The moral complexity of deception is somewhat clarified within a gestalt framework by noting that unaware deception is self-deception. Consciously chosen deception that one takes responsibility for is seen within this gestalt framework as actualizing behavior rather than immoral behavior. Implied in this free responsible choice is that the chooser and everyone else will be better off in the long and short runs.

Nyberg's view of deception includes that deception ought to be done for reasons and not be done whenever one feels like it. That some reasons themselves help one feel better is not mentioned by Nyberg. Having an excessive need to be excessively certain of one's

reasons may contribute to self-deception within the gestalt framework. We need to question the notion that we need to have a reason for feeling what we are feeling. Having a need for a reason for every feeling is tantamount to excessive reflection. Openness to experience implies openness to all experience rather than only openness to cognitive (reasonable) experience. Openness to only cognitive experience implies a closedness to some experience.

I suggest that because of this closedness to experience by school board members, school superintendents, some principals and some teachers we have been deceived into thinking that we are educated when we receive diplomas. Were we self-directing, we would not put up with it.

Footnotes

1. Nyberg, page 2.
2. Nyberg, page 3.
3. Nyberg, page 4
4. One can know with certainty that one has a toothache, but one can't know with certainty that one will have a toothache next week. Knowing with certainty that one will have a toothache next week is an instance of self-deception.
5. Goodlad, John J. A Place Called School. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1984.
6. Karp, Walter. "Why Johnny Can't Think," Harpers, June, 1985.
7. Goleman, Daniel. "Insights into Self-deception," New York Times Magazine, May 12, 1985, p. 36.

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